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SUBJECT: Mongolia's Muslim Minority Reaches Out

REFTEL (A) ULAANBAATAR 454, (B) 06 ULAANBAATAR 237

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[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Despite dismal economic conditions, leaders of Mongolia's Muslim/Kazakh minority in the western province of Bayan Ulgii dismiss fears of Islamic radicalism taking root within their ranks, and say they feel no undue pressure from far-off Ulaanbaatar, even though they are under constant scrutiny from the country's security and intelligence agencies. Mongolia's Muslims have traditionally maintained strong ties to moderate Islamic communities in Turkey, but are now broadening outreach efforts to other Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. They are also looking for U.S. Embassy and NGO support in alleviating the economic hardship that their congregants face. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) As part of the Embassy's continuing outreach to Mongolia's Muslim population, Econoff and Econ Assistant recently toured Bayan Ulgii province and met with four leading figures: Mongolia's leading Muslim cleric, Mufti Shirkhan; the treasurer of the Islamic congregation, Sovietkhan; the director of Ulgii's Islamic school, Salekh; and the person in charge of public relations and faith promotion, Idress. Bayan Ulgii, the westernmost province bordering Russia, China and just 25 miles from Kazakhstan, is home to between 100,000 and 150,000 ethnic Khazakh Sunni Muslims (out of a national population of roughly 2.6 million). Most reside in the regional capital of Ulgii.

[1](#)3. (U) Mongolia's Islamic leaders said they are pleased with their interactions with the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar and were happy to meet with the Charge during his recent travels through the area (ref A; ref B provides an overview of Islam in Mongolia), and again when they traveled to the capital for their national Muslim conference.

¶4. (SBU) It is an open secret that Mongolia's intelligence and security agencies vigilantly monitor the activities of Bayan Ulgii's Muslim/Kazakh minority, citing it as a potential source of homegrown terrorist or separatist activity. Nevertheless, Mufti Shirkhan reported that they have good relations with Ulaanbaatar and do not feel repressed by the central government. (Note: Similarly, discrimination from non-Muslim Mongolians does not appear to be an issue for Mongolia's ethnic Kazakhs. On August 9, Sairaan Kader, a Democratic Party MP and founder of the Mongolian Muslim Society, told us that Mongolian Muslims do not suffer discrimination, although they are concerned about aggressive proselytizing by foreign Christian missionaries. End Note.) Mufti Shirkhan said fears of Islamic radicalism sprouting from western Mongolia are unfounded. Given the small-town nature of the Islamic communities sprinkled throughout the province, any wayward activity would be easily spotted and quickly controlled, he said. He added that Mongolia hosts no foreign clerics who might sow radical ideas. During the 1990s, Ulgii's Muslims brought in a series of moderate clerics from Turkey to help revive the faith after decades of communist suppression, cementing a special bond between the two country's Islamic communities that continues today.

AFTER-SCHOOL RELIGIOUS CLASSES

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¶5. (SBU) According to Salekh, the director of Ulgii's Islamic school, around 100 students attend after-school religion classes at the mosque's facility. Few students go beyond this basic religious training, he said, but each year one or two go overseas to further

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their religious studies, usually to Turkey. A very small number, he said, have gone on to study in other countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

ECONOMIC WOES CONTINUE

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¶6. (U) Economic conditions in Bayan Ulgii remain dismal, with unemployment running well over 30 percent and per capita GDP registering just over \$500, half the national average. The dire economic situation has not only left some ethnic Kazakhs feeling ignored by the central government (septel), it challenges the leadership of the province's Islamic community. Mufti Shirkhan said congregants often approach the mosque for financial assistance, but he conceded that the community lacks sufficient resources to meet their obligations under Zakat, or alms-giving. Instead, the mosque has begun to examine ways to help congregants help themselves. Mukti Shirkhan announced plans to establish a mosque-linked English-language school, and directly solicited Econoff for financial assistance in getting the idea off the ground. Equipping Ulgii's Muslims with better English skills would give them more opportunities to find well-paying jobs, he said. (Note: Embassy Ulaanbaatar organized a three-week English summer camp for ethnic Kazakh high-school students in June and July, under the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' English Access Microscholarship program. We will repeat the camp next year. End Note.)

ASSISTANCE SOUGHT

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¶7. (U) The Mufti also sought Econoff's assistance in establishing links with local branches of NGOs such as World Vision and USAID's Ger Initiative, in the hope of applying their economic-assistance programs to the Muslim community. (Note: Econoff encouraged the Muslim leaders to approach the organizations on their own, but later shared Mufti's ideas with the local Ger Initiative office, which said it would follow up).

¶8. (U) Community leaders reported that they are planning to build a new mosque in Ulgii's city center, close to the river, with financial assistance from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Although the community is proud of its increasing

connections with international Islam - moves aimed at helping the province overcome its relative isolation -- the leaders told us that they have had little interaction with high-level visitors to Mongolia from Islamic countries, with the recent exception of the Emir of Kuwait (reftel A). (NOTE: Community leaders also sought points of contact for American Muslim organizations.)

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